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Itineraries

San Juan & Around

It’s easy to get caught up in San Juan, from lazy days spent exploring the wonders of Old San Juan, to the urban beaches that include Isla Grande, and the edgy – and tasty – wonders of Santurce. But there is plenty to see and do just outside the capital that will give you a much broader picture of Puerto Rico’s diverse pleasures.

At the very least, join one of the sailing day trips out to Culebra, where you’ll get a taste of funky island life and enjoy some sensational snorkeling.

Although you can take more day-time tours, rent a car and do a little freelance exploring instead. Head up to the lush rainforest wonders of El Yunque. Driving Hwy 191, you’ll climb ever higher into the misty peaks and you can pick your breaks for waterfalls and nature hikes. Consider also stopping off at one of the adventure parks where you can zip-line through the trees.

Spend the night at a mountain retreat before returning to San Juan via Luquillo, with its natural wonders, beaches and great food stands.
Touch down in **San Juan** and get to the beaches, exploring Isla Verde, Condado and Ocean Park. Spend the next day weaving through the Unesco treasures of Old San Juan and posing by the ramparts of El Morro. Finish up with an evening among the rollicking scene of Santurce’s bars and restaurants.

Start early on day three and go west, stopping first at **Dorado**, where you can take in some world-class golf or hide out at the beach at Punta Salinas.

Continue west and stop to watch the waves explode over the reefs at **Playa Mar Chiquita**, where you can picnic while enjoying the aquatic drama. Turn southwest, winding up the mountain road to the **Observatorio de Arecibo**. If you're extraordinarily lucky, this might be the day this mountain-sized icon detects life on another planet. Bunk nearby at the restored plantation of **Hacienda Gripiñas**.

Next morning, take full advantage of being in coffee country before finding your way along the Ruta Panorámica, heading up toward Puerto Rico’s tallest peak in the **Reserva Forestal Toro Negro**. Come off your high and make your way to historic **Ponce** to dine and sleep. The next day start slow and enjoy the city’s excellent museums, then head east to sample smoky pork at one of the famed roadside **lechoneras** (eateries specializing in suckling pig) in **Guavate**. Continue east to sleep at a beach house in **Yabucoa**. The cool, green interior of **El Yunque** and its magical rainforest starts day six, which finishes on the white sands of **Playa Luquillo**. At night, glide across the glowing waters of the bioluminescent bay at **Laguna Grande**.

Before returning to San Juan, have a meal from one of the famous **friquitines** (beach kiosks) at Playa Luquillo. Drive back via **Loíza Aldea**, where you can buy a **vejigante** (traditional horned mask), before passing the evening wandering the back streets of Old San Juan and stopping for a drink where you can watch locals and other visitors doing just the same.
The Grand Tour

Spend four days in San Juan and the surrounding areas, getting plenty of beach time and making sure to see Old San Juan. Spend at least one night listening to live salsa and taking in the dance-floor action at Nuyorican Café, the best live music club on the island. Head to El Yunque for a day of hiking, then spend the night in Fajardo and experience the wonder of the bioluminescent bay at Laguna Grande.

The next morning head east aboard the ferry for Culebra – the more intimate cousin to Vieques. The next few days will go by too quickly, snorkeling and swimming at some of the best beaches in the world, and taking a charter trip off to the abandoned white-sand paradise of Isla Culebrita.

Now that your batteries are fully recharged, it’s time to do some exploring. Make for the mainland and follow the quiet road past the sleepy sugar towns of the south coast toward Ponce. Spend a couple of days exploring the colonial buildings and excellent food in the so-called ‘Pearl of the South.’ You can visit La Guancha Paseo Tablado, Centro Ceremonial Indígena de Tibes or make a short detour up the mountain on the Ruta Panorámica to do some hiking and sip the island’s famous coffee.

Definitely allow one day (preferably with an early morning start so you can be done by mid-afternoon when the sun is at its hottest) for the rugged, bone-dry forest of Bosque Estatal de Guánica. After hiking, drive scenic Rte 333 along the south coast and stop to swim at tiny mangrove-enclosed beaches and spend the night in an isolated resort.

You can either spend the day swimming the turquoise water of Playa Santa or head straight to the final destination, Rincón. The last few days of the trip will be spent surfing (or taking lessons) on perfect waves and soaking up the island’s best sunsets with an icy rum drink in hand. Complete the circuit, breaking up the drive with a stop at the Observatorio de Arecibo, before arriving back in San Juan for your final evening, dining in style in Old San Juan or Santurce.
After time in the capital of San Juan, hightail it out of town for your island break. A trip to the islands of Culebra and Vieques displays Puerto Rico in its best light: perfect sand, laid-back atmosphere and ramshackle nightlife. Take a scenic flight to leave the capital: it’s affordable and saves you the hassle and expense of getting to the ferries at Fajardo, plus the daredevil approach to Culebra rivals the best thrill ride.

Start in Culebra, which doesn’t have much in the way of fancy resorts and clubs; the focus here is on the world-class beaches, reef snorkeling and wildlife refuges. With few cars on the island and long, deserted stretches of sand, Culebra offers the serenity that can be all too rare on the crowded Puerto Rican mainland. Visitors can soak in the expansive views of the ocean, breathe the fresh island air and explore beaches, from the renowned Playa Flamenco to the remote and enticing Playa Zoni. Save time for the beautiful snorkeling at Luis Peña Marine Preserve.

After dark, the little harbor at Dewey comes alive with affable expats whose love of karaoke crooning is only rivaled by their thirst for cold cans of Medalla.

Next up is surprising Vieques, the larger island just southwest of Culebra. You can take a ferry back to the mainland and another out to Vieques, but flying is vastly quicker and much more fun. Once you touch down in Isabel Segunda, hang around this atmospheric town for a bit before heading south to Esperanza, the perfect place to savor the slow pace of the tropics while enjoying some fine places to stay, eat and drink. You may not want to leave. Spend the next few days exploring the wealth of south coast beaches in the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge. You will be hard-pressed to choose your favorite as you marvel at small coves and deep bays and try in vain to find a crowd.

Save one night for the magically glowing waters of the Bioluminescent Bay, where you can paddle out in a quiet kayak or glide silently in an electric boat, before flying back to San Juan.
**Off the Beaten Track: Puerto Rico**

**JAYUYA**
Visit the surreal Museo del Cemí in this isolated town, located in a steep-sided valley overlooked by three of the island’s highest peaks, a few kilometers north of the Ruta Panorámica. (p221)

**SAN GERMAN**
The island’s second-oldest city (founded 1511) is well preserved and includes one of the oldest surviving churches in the Americas. (p187)

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**LA PARGUERA**
Discover this low-key and funky seaside town, with its maze of mangrove canals running to the open ocean, which has a 40ft diving wall. (p162)

**COAMO**
The namesake thermal baths here are linked to Ponce de León’s quest for the fountain of youth. (p157)

**ADJUNTAS**
This cool subtropical jungle haven in the hills is rich with bananas, coffee and citrus fruits. (p222)

**REFUGIO NACIONAL CABO ROJO**
The southernmost extent of Puerto Rico is crowned by its iconic Los Morrillos Lighthouse; nearby is the beautiful beach of Playa Santa. (p186)
Try to see both coasts of the island from the Mirador La Piedra Degetau before taking in the extraordinary spectacle of Puerto Rico’s deepest canyon, the Cañón de San Cristóbal. (p214)

Enjoy beautiful hiking and swim in icy pools that are almost empty for much of the year. On your way, grab lunch from one of the lechoneras along the highway near Guavate. (p213)

Enjoy low-key beaches, small villages and great eats on this drive that's well off the main road. (p108)

Journey back a few decades in time as this narrow road corkscrews through the lush mountains on the south side of El Yunque to the coast. (p111)
OUR STORY
A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, Across Asia on the Cheap. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born. Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’. 

OUR WRITERS

Ryan Ver Berkmoes
Coordinating Author, San Juan, El Yunque & East Coast, Culebra & Vieques
Ryan first visited Puerto Rico in 2004. On his visits since, he has criss-crossed the islands, always wondering where he’ll next find the perfect beach. Recent thrills included trying to find an authentic daiquiri (no blenders ever!) and getting lost in El Morro. He succeeded in one but not the other. Off-island, Ryan splits his time between the US and Europe and writes about travel and more at ryanverberkmoes.com. Follow him on Twitter via @ryanvb.

Luke Waterson
Ponce & South Coast, West Coast, North Coast, Central Mountains
Whether it’s the spontaneous street parties, the sun-kissed spirit of revolution or the wicked coffee, Luke and Latin America are in love. Having authored Lonely Planet guidebooks from Cuba to Peru, he relished tracking down the Latino soul of the USA’s Caribbean outpost (finding lots of street parties, revolution and coffee). Hiking in the central mountains and caffeine-refuelling at hidden haciendas were his top experiences this time round. (Well, the cold box of beer with the off-duty marines on that idyllic cay wasn’t bad.) Luke lives in Slovakia; examples of his work can be found on his blog at http://englishmaninslovakia.com.

Read more about Ryan at: lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/profiles/ryanverberkmoes
Read more about Luke at: lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/profiles/lukewaterson